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January 12, 2005

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY  
OFFICE OF HEARINGS AND APPEALS

*Appeal*

Name of Case: Worker Appeal

Date of Filing: June 28, 2004

Case No.: TIA-0123

XXXXXXXXXX (the Applicant) applied to the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Worker Advocacy (OWA) for assistance in filing for state workers' compensation benefits. The Applicant's late father (the Worker) was a DOE contractor employee at a DOE facility. An independent physician panel (the Physician Panel or the Panel) found that the Worker did not have an illness related to a toxic exposure at DOE. The OWA accepted the Panel's determination, and the Applicant filed an appeal with the DOE's Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA). As explained below, we have concluded that the appeal should be denied.

*I. Background*

A. The Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act

The Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act of 2000 as amended (the Act) concerns workers involved in various ways with the nation's atomic weapons program. See 42 U.S.C. ' ' 7384, 7385. As originally enacted, the Act provided for two programs. Subpart B provided for a Department of Labor (DOL) program providing federal compensation for certain illnesses. See 20 C.F.R. Part 30. Subpart D provided for a DOE assistance program for DOE contractor employees filing for state workers' compensation benefits. Under the DOE program, an independent physician panel assessed whether a claimed illness or death arose out of and in the course of the worker's employment, and exposure to a toxic substance, at a DOE facility. 42 U.S.C. ' 7385o(d)(3); 10 C.F.R. Part 852 (the Physician Panel Rule). The OWA was responsible for this program, and its web site provides extensive information concerning the program.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.eh.doe.gov/advocacy](http://www.eh.doe.gov/advocacy)

The Physician Panel Rule provided for an appeal process. An applicant could appeal a decision by the OWA not to submit an application to a Physician Panel, a negative determination by a Physician Panel that was accepted by the OWA, and a final decision by the OWA not to accept a Physician Panel determination in favor of an applicant. The instant appeal was filed pursuant to that Section. The Applicant sought review of a negative determination by a Physician Panel that was accepted by the OWA. 10 C.F.R. ' 852.18(a)(2).

While the Applicant's appeal was pending, Congress repealed Subpart D. Ronald W. Reagan Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, Pub. L. No. 108-375 (October 28, 2004). Congress added a new subpart to the Act - Subpart E, which establishes a DOL workers' compensation program for DOE contractor employees. Under Subpart E, all Subpart D claims will be considered as Subpart E claims. In addition, under Subpart E, an applicant is deemed to have an illness related to a workplace toxic exposure at DOE if the applicant received a positive determination under Subpart B.

During the transition period, in which DOL sets up the Subpart E program, OHA continues to process appeals of negative OWA determinations.

## B. Procedural Background

The Applicant was employed as an electrician at DOE's Savannah River site. The Applicant worked at the site for nearly 13 years, between 1987 and 2001.

The Applicant filed an application with OWA, requesting physician panel review of two illnesses - asbestosis and leukemia.

The Physician Panel rendered a negative determination on each claimed illness. For the asbestosis, the Panel found that, although the Worker did have chronic obstructive lung disease, the Worker did not have asbestosis. For the leukemia, the Panel found that the Worker did not have leukemia.

The OWA accepted the Physician Panel's negative determinations on the claimed illnesses. The Applicant filed the instant appeal.

## II. Analysis

Under the Physician Panel Rule, independent physicians rendered an opinion whether a claimed illness was related to a toxic exposure during employment at DOE. The Rule required that the Panel address each claimed illness, make a finding whether that illness was related

to a toxic exposure at DOE, and state the basis for that finding.  
10 C.F.R. § 852.12.

In her appeal, the Applicant maintains that the negative determinations are incorrect. She advances several arguments. First, the Applicant argues that she knows for a fact that the Worker had asbestosis and that the condition was not from cigarette smoking. Second, the Applicant states that the Worker received compensation from court cases involving asbestos and from asbestos manufacturers. Third, the Applicant argues that one of the Worker's doctors was "almost certain" that the Worker had leukemia at the time of the Worker's death. The Applicant points to a progress note in the Worker's medical records in which the doctor expresses concern that the Worker's steadily declining blood counts could ultimately transition to acute leukemia in the future.

The Applicant's arguments are not a basis for finding panel error. As mentioned above, the Panel addressed the claimed illnesses, made a determination on each illness, and explained the basis of that determination. For the asbestosis, the Panel determined that the Worker did not have asbestosis. A key factor in the Panel's determination was that the Worker's autopsy did not reveal findings consistent with asbestosis. Furthermore, the Panel indicated that, even if the Worker did have asbestosis, the latency period between exposure to asbestos and the onset of asbestosis is significantly longer than the relatively short period of time between the Worker's employment at DOE and the onset of his illness. For the leukemia, the Panel determined that the Worker's blood and bone marrow test results did not provide evidence of leukemia, but rather indicated refractive anemia with myelodysplasia. As the foregoing indicates, the Applicant's arguments are mere disagreements with the Panel's medical judgment rather than indications of panel error.

Disagreements with the Panel's medical judgment do not provide a basis for finding panel error and, therefore, the appeal should be denied. In compliance with Subpart E, the claim will be transferred to the DOL for review. The DOL is in the process of developing procedures for evaluating and issuing decisions on these claims. OHA's denial of this claim does not purport to dispose of or in any way prejudice the DOL's review of the claim under Subpart E.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED THAT:

- (1) The Appeal filed in Worker Advocacy Case No. TIA-0123 be, and hereby is, denied.

- (2) This denial pertains only to the DOE claim and not to the DOL's review of this claim under Subpart E.
- (3) This is a final order of the Department of Energy.

George B. Breznay  
Director  
Office of Hearings and Appeals

Date: January 12, 2005